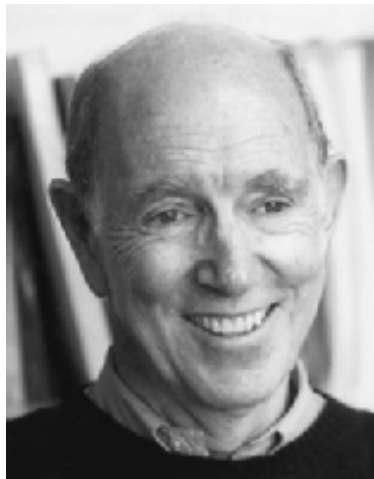


# **Cross-Cultural and Historical Perspectives on the Developmental Consequences of Education**

**Michael Cole**

**2005**

*Based on a lecture given at Oxford University, 1 November 2002*



**Mike Cole**

*Part 3 of 3 Parts*

## **Looking to the Future**

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### **Looking to the Future**

Having traveled through several millennia of time and across the globe in examining the past and present state of education in relation to culture, I will now offer some conclusions about the trajectory I have drawn and how it might provide some indications about the future of education.

First, it is useful to consider a handful of generalizations that appear to apply quite broadly across historical time and space:

- (1) Formal schooling arises as part of the division of labor in societies when they reach a certain scale in terms of number of people.
- (2) The precise content of the curriculum depends upon political-economic and ideological foundations of the society. In societies where large cities operate as centers of control, literacy and numeracy are at the heart of the curriculum and material accumulation is an important value. In large agrarian societies, while basic-skills training is not entirely absent, religious/ideological training may become the dominant form of activity for most participants.
- (3) Formal schooling is never socially neutral. Even presumably neutral skill acquisition presumes the value-laden activities they were designed to accomplish, and it is usually accompanied by ideological considerations that exaggerate the actual use value of the knowledge acquired.

(4) Formal schooling mediated by print and other sign systems produces age segregation and the institutionalized forms of hierarchy that articulate with the state or ecclesiastical institutions of which they are a part in a variety of ways.

(5) Cognitive changes associated with formal schooling appear to be content and context specific for those directly involved. However, they may become general to the extent that many practices within that society demand skill in that content and the extent to which participation in schooling changes participants' orientation to modern bureaucratic structures and to the raising of their own children.

(6) Because formal school actualizes the enculturation of a society's children, schooling bears different relations to society in different countries and the culture of the classroom bears varying relationships to children's home cultures in multicultural societies. There is, at present, no agreed-upon way to deal with the difficulties that arise from the interaction of presumably universal school content and manifestly variable socio-cultural values.

This short list of generalizations makes it unlikely that we can use the cultural history of schooling to predict the future of schooling with any certainty because the future depends so crucially on the sort of societies that schooling will mediate. However, in the spirit of this essay, I can speculate about major choices facing humanity with respect to the enculturation/schooling/education of its children. Each is presented as a choice between contested tendencies.

(1) Centralized standardization versus de-centralized adaptation.

(a) For many decades and across many countries, there has been a continuing, if not escalating, movement of people away from the countryside into large, region-like cities and a parallel amplification of the model of rationalized, bureaucratized education to meet the demands of economic and political life ever more mediated by complex technologies. The intensification of this trend tends toward ever more restrictive demands for standardization, increasing value of high-level certification, and hierarchicalization of society based upon educational achievement.

(b) As standardization and centralization have reached high levels, requiring rigid adherence to prescribed curricula, there has been a counter-tendency to recover the properties of enculturation in small face-to-face societies, such as the suggestion that one adopt new technologies to support implementation of the metaphors of classrooms as a community of learners, or the use of cognitive apprenticeship as a model for formal education [Brown, Metz, & Campione, 1996; Collins, Brown, & Newman, 1989; Rogoff, Matusov, & White, 1996]. In part these efforts represent attempts to recoup the losses incurred by the overbearing control

of bureaucratic institutions, in part they reflect changes in the nature of modern work in which distributed production, teamwork, and individual initiative appear essential. This contrast can also be characterized in terms of the longstanding distinction between training and education. Current technological advantages make radical de-centralization/localization of schooling a practical possibility but appear to recapitulate and perhaps even exacerbate prior inequalities [Warschauer, 2003].

## (2) Separation versus embeddedness.

(a) In pre-centralized, face-to-face societies, education/training and enculturation were not sharply differentiated. The rise of formal schooling, particularly in association with the rise of cities and centralized state apparatuses, has been associated with separation of the school from society. On the one hand, this produces a form of efficiency in insuring the transmission of technical skills deemed essential to the society's maintenance. On the other hand, it has encouraged the encapsulation of school-based learning and devaluation of knowledge acquired in other settings.

(b) The disutilities of this form of education (including high drop-out rates, narrow specialization, social alienation including the inability to deal effectively with cultural variation) have produced a variety of counter institutional moves, including inquiry-based curricula which take the local community's traditions, ethos, and problems as the inspiration for organizing education, in effect seeking to break down the boundaries between school and community (as manifested in notions of communities of learners, home-based education, problem-based learning, cultural-model-based education).

At present it is too early to tell whether any of the alternatives to centralized, standardized models of education will gain ascendancy and if so, where the leading edge of such changes will be: in the most highly advanced, technologically oriented parts of society as means of dealing with cultural diversity and decentralization of knowledge and industrial production, or on the technological periphery, as a mode of resistance and survival in the face of centralized globalizing forces?

To a very great extent, the outcome with respect to the two issues I have singled out to end this discussion will depend on the nature of society that emerges from the current round of globalized, just-in-time, more-or-less instantaneous interactions at a distance that have come to be the hallmark of modern life. In the early 1980's, a Soviet archeologist of my acquaintance said that Sumer was the most totalitarian society of all time. If the model of education to which it gave rise continues to dominate the world, it bodes ill for us all because that form of education has brought us to the brink of self-extermination. But whether, and how,

a more horizontally organized, distributed, democratic and locally controlled form of societal interaction and enabling forms of education can compete with the Leviathan of history is highly uncertain. The alternative will be, if and when it comes into being, a hybrid of new and old forms, of the standardized and the locally adapted. It will eschew the notion of human education as the preparation of children to triumph over nature and teach us how to live within, as a part of nature, including nature's multicolored, multicultural, enormously heterogeneous forms of society.

If the social sphere is to become re-integrated, it will not be by returning to the past but by creating a new kind of future in which central values of the past combine with the amazing accomplishments of the present to enable us to live in a sustainable garden, for and with our children.

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**From:**

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